

This was written, three months ago, in Italian for Italians.
I was pleasantly surprised by the interest (and agreement) that it met in its home country.
Some readers are suggesting that it may be interesting for other people around the world.
So here it is in English.

“Viva l’Italia”?

(the point is, *which* Italy)

Giancarlo Livraghi – October 2009

“*Viva l’Italia*”. These words sound strange. Hardly anyone in Italy seems to be able to say them seriously. It’s reasonable that such a loud “cry” may sound rhetorical, antiquated, embarrassing. We could be more convincing by saying it more quietly. But the problem is that we aren’t convinced. More often than not, it’s said with bitter irony, depressed disappointment.

Self-criticism is an intelligent resource. But defeatism, widespread in our culture, is something else. We don’t look at our misgivings to try to correct them. Or flaunt them with arrogance, as some proud countries do. We just grumble and moan, as if we were condemned to unavoidable decline and our only resource was to find a hiding place in the nicks and cracks of a crumbling environment.

“Feeling Italian” seems to be a shared experience only in case of a football game or some other sports event.

We aren’t nationalistic – and that is a quality. We aren’t xenophobic, except when unplanned and poorly managed immigration brings to surface shades of racism from which we thought we were immune. But we shouldn’t forget that Italy has always been a melting pot of different ethnics and cultures – and this isn’t a problem, it’s a resource.

Am I Italian? I don’t know. I was lucky enough to be born in an environment open to diversity. Since I was a child, I spoke and understood more than one language, I met people from different countries, I was surrounded by shelves of books of different origins, I tried to learn from everything I could find. There are several places around the world where I feel at home – or, at least, quite comfortable with the neighborhood.

I never could identify myself with the “prototype Italian” as defined by commonplace and stereotype. I find it more and more difficult to “belong”, to what Italy appears to be or to what is reflected in currently widespread perceptions.

But I am not a stranger. There are people, in all regions of Italy, that I like and respect. Even when (and at this time it’s happening more often) I find it difficult to feel Italian, I am however a sincere friend of the country where I live. And it hurts so see it sick, humiliated, stultified (though it isn’t really as stupid and hopeless as it seems).

Many countries strive to appear better than they are. Italy is doing the opposite. The clumsiness of its appearing is corroding and polluting the reality of what it is.

Some discussion has started about the 150th anniversary, in 2011, of Italy’s political unity. There are already disagreements, disappointments and often pointless debates. With the current state of affairs, it’s unlikely to be much of a celebration. In any case we need much more than a short-lived ceremony to re-discover what Italy is and what it means to be Italian.



This image has no great design quality – or conceptual values. But, at least, it’s understandable (unlike an awful “symbol” that was used in 2007 for an ill-fated “italia.it” website, that a year later was closed after having wasted a grotesque amount of taxpayers’ money and made the whole country look stupid in the eyes of the world).

The problem is that there is a serious lack of perspective.

The history of Italy (and its identity) didn’t start with the “Risogimento” (it means resurgence, not starting from scratch) that led to political unity in 1861.

Italy isn’t 150 year old. It’s over 2500.

It would take several pages to explore and explain the historical details, but the fact is that there were areas and cultures called “Italia” before the foundation of Rome. Over two thousand years ago, when Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, a large part of Italy was “metropolitan” territory (it wasn’t a “province” in the empire, its inhabitants were “Roman citizens”). Shortly later that expanded to most of the peninsula. And ever since it has been an acknowledged fact that there is a place, and a people, called Italy – as a clearly defined cultural identity, even when it was split in several different states.

Latin wasn’t the language of one city. Together with Greek, it was the international language – also beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire. It has lasted as such longer than any other – and to some extent it still is (not only in the case of science).

Torn and tormented by wars and invasions, split into independent communes, kingdoms, duchies and foreign dominations, it always was clearly identified as Italy.

It has never been just a “geographic definition”, though its distinctive shape and position are, as they always were, part of its identity.¹

Seven hundred years ago, when literature in local languages was beginning to develop in Europe, Italian authors had no doubt that their homeland was called Italy – and that it was in trouble.

A sad and cruel picture by Dante Alighieri (*Purgatorio*, VI, 76-78).

*Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello,
nave senza nocchiere in gran tempesta, n
on donna di province, ma bordello.*

Enslaved and in pain, a ship in a storm with no helmsman, not a dominator of provinces, but a brothel.

Just as concerned was Francesco Petrarca (*Canzoniere*, CXXVIII).

*Italia mia, benché il parlar sia indarno
a le piaghe mortali
che nel bel corpo tuo sì spesso veggo ...*

A heartbreaking cry of pain about the “beloved mother” and her wonderful beauty, nature, art, history and culture humiliated and wounded by war, violence, feuds and plots. Distressed as they were about what was happening, writers and poets had no doubt about the existence of a country that they loved. And its name was Italy.

¹ When we look at a globe or a map or a satellite photograph we can notice that few countries worldwide have such a distinctive shape as this unique peninsula at the center of the Mediterranean.

In that dismaying state of affairs, wounded Italy was beginning to develop one of the greatest cultural evolutions of all times – the Renaissance. An extraordinary and enlightening combination of the rediscovery of classic values and the invention of modernity.

The same cycle happened again, in different ways, in following centuries. And that is, once again, the best way out (if not the only one) from the swamp in which Italy is sinking.

Today the wounds aren't as deep as the "mortal plagues" that worried Italy's classic poets (and also others at different times). But it's hard to avoid a perception that it is sick, with a nasty combination of old and new syndromes.

What we need isn't nostalgia. But without the strength of deep roots all countries and cultures would be much weaker in building the future. Especially those, such as Italy, that have been alive for millennia – surviving all sorts of sometimes tragic, sometimes ridiculous degeneration.

Do the "glories" and achievements belong only to remote (and stupidly forgotten) past, to be placed in the dusty cupboards of occasionally rediscovered memorabilia? Not at all.

Fifty years ago a country afflicted with poverty, inadequate literacy, the hideous consequences of a stupid dictatorship – and demolished by a disastrous war – found the energy and the talent to react and move ahead, with what a surprised world called "the Italian miracle" (and it wasn't only in the economy).

To this day there are people, companies and organizations (in most cases away from the limelight and the confused reporting of mismanaged nonsense) that are doing things, and producing results, of which we could be proud if we were aware of their achievements.

The world thinks that in Italy there is corruption. Unfortunately, it's true. It isn't only the plague of organized crime (that is notoriously based in a few regions, but is spreading in the whole country, with alliances across borders). Or the network of bribery and quid-pro-quo that no "cleaning" effort is able to uproot. There is complacency, an insidious perception that "so the world turns", making the most honest and reliable people feel that they must "live with the fact" that they are surrounded by an ambiguous atmosphere of "tolerance".

Corruption is everywhere. In several places around the world it is much worse than in Italy. The "Italian difference" isn't that it exists, but the widespread perception that it's an incurable disease – or, even worse, "normality".

The world thinks that Italians are superficial. They aren't (or, in any case, not more than anyone else). But many that "represent" our country are busy making it seem so. We are drowning in the cult of futility, gossip and frivolous nonsense. It's happening all over the world, but in Italy it has become the dominating culture. Aggressively cultivated by mainstream media. Sometimes as a deliberate attempt to distract public opinion from reality. But more often it's sheer habit – and stupidity.

(As Theodore Adorno used to say, *«the culture industry not so much adapts to the reactions of its customers as it counterfeits them.»*)

Nearly all the people I know (and many that I meet occasionally) are kind, considerate, well mannered, genuinely friendly – also aware and well educated. But it's uphill for good taste and humanity to overcome the daily inundation of vulgarity, triviality, superficiality and stupid arrogance.

Italy is a place of extraordinary beauty – in its landscapes and artistic treasures. But when we call it "*il bel paese*" we are sarcastically comparing it to a brand of industrial cheese, that isn't bad, but bland and indifferent compared to the wonderful variety of Italian cuisine (that isn't only the pleasure of good food, but also part of a rich cultural heritage.)

There is much more at stake than a “celebration” in year 2011. Pomp and ceremony are likely to be shallow. And 150 years are a nearsighted perspective. The roots are much deeper, in two and a half millennia of troubled, but often enlightening, history.

Nearsighted masochism is the way to decadence. And superficial “optimism” wouldn’t lead anywhere. Italians are good at “surviving” in difficult circumstances, but that can only work for a while and in a narrow environment. Individual or parochial egoism can only lead to catastrophe.

It would be much better, not just for one country, but for the whole world, if the lessons of history and the treasures of culture were a tool for the future. In the practice of getting things done and managing real innovation, not in the empty ceremony of rhetoric.

We need an awakening, a **Renaissance** (with a capital R). In spite of the depressing circumstances, it can be done – as it was centuries ago, in situations that were worse than today’s.

If we sit in our nearsighted cubicles and wait for some unknown miracle solution to come from “somewhere above”, we can go on weeping for another thousand years (that is, those of us who somehow manage to survive in a decaying environment).

The fact is that a thousand determined little squirrels can do more, and better, than a clumsy and confused pachyderm. Margaret Mead was somewhat overoptimistic when she said «*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world.*» But if many small groups of thoughtful, committed people change little bits of the world, the combined outcome can be surprisingly effective.

One of the tools is to open little windows of good sense in the overwhelming and overbuilt architecture of misinformation, manipulation, commonplace, ignorance, superficiality, arrogance and stupidity – before the whole mess comes crumbling down and some of the best thinking is buried under the ruins.

Nobody is going to give us the tools for another “miracle” (as nobody ever did). But, once again, the search for “enlightenment”, rooted in the deep reservoir of old and new culture, can lead to unexpectedly pleasant results. Isn’t it worth trying?

Am I falling into a trap of optimism?

No, I am not so stupid.

I am just trying to say to myself (before I do so to anyone else)
that complaining is useless, crying on spilt milk is pointless,
depression can only lead to more of the same, resignation is humiliating,
obedience and compliance are weak – and irony can be relaxing,
but it doesn’t lead anywhere if it’s only gossip.

It’s better to roll up our sleeves and try to *do* something.